

Howerton, Paul W.
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Paul W.

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THE STATUS OF TECHNICAL INFORMATION CENTERS

Paul W. Howerton

Vice President, Information for Industry, Inc.

Introduction:

If one may adapt a classic phrase from that great practioner of the English language, Churchill, it can be said that: "Never in the history of human communication has so much been written by so many which is of use to so few." The question before this Institute is: "Why are these writings of use to so few?" My contribution to the discussion will concern itself with the status of technical information centers with the word "status" to be understood to mean both "prestige" and "hierarchial position". I shall attempt to avoid confusion of Utopian ideal with reality by discussing status already achieved, but I shall reserve the right to make forecasts at the end of this paper concerning certain pragmatic developments in the handling of technical information in both the short and long range. These forecasts will be made in the general context of the status of the technical information center.

In the course of this paper, a recurrent theme of "service to the user" will be evident, and the principal thrust of my argument will be that the term "status" is semantically equivalent to "service". The two generic types of technical information centers to be discussed are: 1) the internal technical information center which serves its own parent organization exclusively, and

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2) the center which makes its service available to the scientific and technical community without restriction beyond normal administrative rules.

Status of the User:

The popular assumption that information center users are, by definition, both industrious and well-informed not only about their personal subject interests but also how the information is retrieved needs to be dispelled. A symbiosis of user and proprietor of technical information centers results in an advantage to both parties. The user who communicates his total problem to the center's information specialists gains status by virtue of his acceptance of the specialists' talents in solving his problem completely and expeditiously.

There is, however, a more important status gain for the user who understands the capabilities and limitations of the center. He tends to improve the capabilities and reduce the limitations of the service by his active participation with the information specialists in the identification of the association of units of information.

On the other side of this partnership, let the technical information center proprietor volunteer his expertise to the scientist. Traditional library practice has been reluctant to allow the client direct access to the stacks and to refuse him access to data or information files. There were good reasons for both of these actions, but in today's world, information services can still defend the integrity of collections while guiding the user through the intricacies of the sophisticated organization of the system.

In other words, the only purpose of a technical information center is to serve its clientele. The improvement of the status of the user by responsive action in the center will be reflected in a concomitant improvement in the status of the center.

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The Internal Technical Information Center:

When a company, a government agency or a component of either operates a technical information center, it assumes a responsibility to supply adequate and useful service to its customers. This responsibility is frequently not met because of lack of status within the organization which is to be served. As the former Deputy Assistant Director for Central Reference I know that the real success of the central reference facility of the Central Intelligence Agency is largely due to the expertness and ingenuity of its staff, but the fact that Mr. Allen W. Dulles and General C. P. Cabell as the Director and Deputy Director respectively of the CIA, actively supported the efforts of the staff guaranteed the status of the facility. If someone dismissed the central reference service as inadequate or incompetent, he knew that the justification for his statements might have to be presented at the highest levels of the Agency.

The status of any internal technical information center is directly proportional to the support given the effort by top management. It is this statement that must be the keystone of the center. This position leads one into the question of what should be the orientation of a technical information center in an organization. Should there be a horizontal administrative relationship with customer components, that is -- should each division head have authority jointly or independently to determine policy for the center? Or should there be vertical administrative responsibility to a top official to whom customer component heads also report? I have no doubt but what the latter course is the wiser both from the point of view of the center and its clientele.

Let me now refer back to my earlier points about user status. I have found that the most effective internal technical information centers had their reference staffs substantively trained in the fields of science of greatest

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interest to the people using the center, and secondarily trained in library techniques. The so-called literature scientist falls into this pattern of preparation for exercising his ingenuity to induce new levels of knowledge from his base of experience both with the tools of the library and his discipline. Because these internal technical information centers are usually, but with some noteworthy exceptions, defining their scope fairly narrowly, the qualifications I suggest are not difficult to attain. Customer acceptance is much more likely to be easily established in an environment of peers.

The Public Technical Information Center:

There has been a deploring of the situation, the wringing of hands and wailing about the inadequacy of technical information centers available to the general public. Long and tedious hearings have been held by the Congress on the subject. The press, both technical and general, has had feature articles or editorial comments on the subject. But when a rigorous rather than emotional analysis is made of the use of existing and competent aids to technical documentation, such an apathetic view is held by so many scientists that one is startled by their vocal concern for technical information centers. The findings of surveys made under National Science Foundation auspices support the contention that the present scientific and technical literature of the world is not being used by the scientific community as it should be. Why does this condition exist?

I believe the reason lies in the status of these centers and tools in the scientific community. Those who view this situation with alarm do not realize that documentation and documentalists have now reached a professional level commensurate with the other members of the total research team. The establishment of technical information centers is regarded as deflecting funds which could be directed to support of laboratory science. There are many who believe this technical information center problem belongs to government alone. I do

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not count myself in this group. Private enterprise, which must provide a satisfactory product or fail, has a stronger motivation toward the efficient and useful operation of information centers just as it does in other marketing enterprises. I have urged that when machine translation becomes an operational capability, the production of translations be turned over to private enterprise.

The task-oriented service bureau to which industry, government or education may turn for comprehensive coverage of the literature of the task on a retainer or fee basis, must deliver the goods or fall by the wayside. The status of these privately organized and administered centers will be measured by the service it performs in response to the interests of its clientele.

Small companies, whose budgets cannot justify the establishment of a technical library facility, can command the services of substantively competent documentalists in the centers set up by private enterprise. The integrity of the staff of the center will protect the proprietary interests of the client in relationship to other clients in the same field. Without this assurance the center's prestige and status will fall into oblivion. For a fee considerably less than the cost of setting up its own information center, a company can have linguistic, substantive and documentation talents applied to its problem which, in many cases, even the largest internal technical information centers cannot assemble.

The compatibility of an information service, such as an abstracting or current-awareness service, with the technological advancements in the mechanical linguistics of indexing, the hardware of storage and the techniques of reproduction must take into account the interdisciplinary flavor of modern research. The tremendous corpus of technical literature already in being must be tied logically to the generations of research results of the future. The scientific

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method prescribes that from a data base of the past, extrapolations into the unknown are made followed by the collection of evidential support to change the hypotheses into scientific fact. This retrospective search of the literature of the past has to make a compatible link-up with the handling techniques of the newer reports of today and the yet unwritten material of the future. To do this thing breeds status.

Conclusion:

The burden of my discussion can be summarized as follows: Status is a function of service; service depends on alertness to the changing interests of the clientele; and alertness depends on positive efforts to attain the best communication possible between the technical information center user and proprietor. The support of the internal center by top management is essential to the achievement of status and recognition. The so-called public technical information center or service operated by private enterprise has a dimension of incentive to service not possessed by efforts within the government structure -- that of satisfaction of the customer or failure.

Up to now there has been little real effort to let the rules of supply and demand apply to the handling of technical information centers. I believe the time has come when the economics of the literature problem should enter the picture. The adage that things are usually worth what you pay for them or will quickly adjust to that condition, would be the term of reference for establishing a new approach to our concern for the increase in the technical literature problem.